

# theguardianweekly

## A land without therapists

Monday February 9th 2009

Thwarted in her attempts to find a psychoanalyst in London, American expat **Delia Lloyd** learns the local work-around: muddling through

As the dust began to settle after my recent move to London, I was plagued by a gnawing sensation that something was missing. So I did a quick mental checklist. Let's see: phone accounts set up, TV and internet connected, kids settled into schools, pictures hung in a way that suggests we might commit to living here. So what was troubling me, I wondered?

And then it dawned on me: no therapist. I'm an American. So for me, having a shrink is pretty much a way of life. It's like owning a car or eating organic. Once you've attained a certain level of income, education and neurosis, therapy's just part of the package.

In the US, practically everyone I know has a therapist. Often they have several: one to do the head shrinking, another to administer the medication, a third thrown in to control an eating disorder or smoking addiction. My sister, a fellow member of the therapy-as-life-strategy genre, recently noted that her family has more therapists than members.

I assumed it would work the same way over here. Wrong. This instantly became clear when I went to see my general practitioner, the first port of call for all things medical in the UK. Our conversation went something like this:

She: "So, what can I help you with today?"

Me: "Well, I'm looking for a therapist."

She: "Um, excuse me, a what? Do you mean a physical therapist? An aroma therapist?"

Me: (Perplexed) "No, I had in mind more of an everyday sort of therapist – you know, like a psychotherapist."

She: (Cough) "I see. Are you schizophrenic?"

Me: (Taken aback) "Uh, no!"

She: "Psychotic? Bipolar? Suicidal?"

Me: (Aghast) "No! I just want someone to – you know – talk to about stuff."

She: "Hmm. I'm afraid I don't know what to tell you. I could get you a referral if you had a severe mental illness, but as you describe yourself, you just don't fit the bill."

At this point, my eyes were practically bulging out of my head. "But you're a doctor!" I wanted to scream. "In the States, you could ask your dentist for anti-depressants and they'd give them to you." But instead I took a more sociological approach. By now, you see, I was really fascinated by the utter disconnect in this conversation. "So, what do people do over here when they have issues?" I asked.

She looked genuinely puzzled, and shrugged, and I could see her filing away "issues" as a peculiarly American accessory, like personalised licence plates or over-sized coffee mugs. "I don't know. I suppose they just... muddle through."

Muddle through. With a single parsimonious turn of phrase, my doctor had just encapsulated the biggest cultural divide between the UK and the US that I'd encountered while living in London, but never put my finger on. It explains why it does absolutely no good to complain to the customer service people when your internet connection isn't fast enough. Or to yell at the power company when they keep telling you – for three months – that your new account is on its way. No one here complains, they just grin and bear it. "Mustn't grumble," they say.

It also explains the preponderance of what my husband calls "work-arounds". The handle on your washer-dryer is broken? No problem, use this spatula to pry it open. Is your entire body covered with a red, itchy rash? Don't go to the doctor, drink more water and avoid swimming pools.

At the battle of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington is reported to have told a cavalry officer, "By Jove, sir, I think you've lost a leg." To which the officer replied, "By Jove, sir, I believe I have."

As a British friend of mine so aptly sums up: there's a reason why some stereotypes are stereotypes. Americans really are more demanding and self-absorbed. Brits really are more stoic and inhibited. That's just the way it is.

Recognising this in such explicit terms, I suddenly felt a lot better. Which naturally, only got me wondering: maybe I don't need that shrink after all.

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